

THE CENTRALITY OF PREACHING AS A MARK AND FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST

Preaching is essential to the life of the church. Without faithful preaching of God's Word, the mission of the church would be left unfinished. Not only is proper preaching of God's Word essential, it is also central to the Church of Jesus Christ. Preaching is a mark of the church because it describes the church. Preaching is also a function of the church because it carries out the mission endeavors of the church. Edification of the saints and the salvation of the lost are both accomplished through the preaching of God's Word. All through history – the true church is centralized upon the preaching of God's holy Word. Through history, where the people are centralized upon proper preaching of God's Word, the other essentials fall into place. Likewise, throughout history when the people of God are not centralized upon the preaching of God's Word, the ordinances, theology, and missions are all perverted to some degree. Therefore, it is the goal of this paper to demonstrate that faithful preaching of God's Word is the central mark and function of the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. This paper will cover three areas that provide clear evidence of the centrality of preaching in relation to the church of Jesus Christ. The areas that will be explored are the biblical evidence, the office evidence, and the historical evidence of the centrality of preaching as a mark and function of the church of Jesus Christ.

Biblical Evidence

“In the New Testament *keryx* is found only three times...In each of the three instances the ‘herald’ is proclaiming a divine event...The nominal cognate, *kerygma*, occurs six times in

the N.T...The verb *keryssein* occurs approximately 59 times in the N.T.”¹ Although not all uses of this root imply the act of heralding the truth in the verbal sense, it should be noted that preaching is an important part of the New Testament church. From Old Testament days when the people of God gathered around the Word of God (Nehemiah 8) to the days of Jesus’ childhood when he stood and taught them in the synagogue (Luke 4), the stage was being set for the church to be centralized upon the Word of God. As Jesus came into the world as the Word – God spoke through His Son – and the church has always been centralized upon the Word of God. Therefore, as we see in the biblical evidence through the New Testament – the preaching of God’s Word is central to the church of Jesus Christ.

Acts 2:42

Acts 2:42: They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (NASB).

In this text the early church is described as a gathered assembly for worship on the first day of the week – and their worship involved the Apostles’ teaching (the Word of God). Commenting on this verse, John MacArthur says, “God designed the church to be a place where the Word is explained and proclaimed.”² It is important to note that the text includes the Apostles’ teaching as first in list of early church functions. The point is clear – preaching the Word of God was central to the early church.

Acts 5:42

Acts 5:42: And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus {as} the Christ (NASB).

It is important when dealing with the book of Acts to ask whether or not the text is speaking in a descriptive or prescriptive manner. As we see in Acts chapter five, the Apostles

¹ Craig A. Evans, “Preacher’ and ‘Preaching’: Some Lexical Observations.” *JETS* 24.4 (1981): 316.

² John MacArthur, *Acts 1-12*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 82-83.

are taken away and thrown into prison. Following the testimony of Gamaliel – the council chose not to kill them, but they did beat them and then commanded them to refrain from preaching. As the Apostles left the council – they rejoiced in their suffering and verse forty two explains that they continued teaching and preaching in the temple and in the houses that Jesus is the Christ. This was a bold move – but a move of necessity. They must preach Jesus Christ.

Romans 10:14-15

***Romans 10:14-15:** How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS OF GOOD THINGS (NASB)!"*

Paul centers in on the issue of preaching as he addresses the Romans. In this text, Paul throws out powerful and pointed questions. *“How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher (NASB)?”* Therefore, the point Paul is making is essential to the work of an evangelist – but that work of evangelism is also a part of the church. Paul draws support from the Old Testament passage of Isaiah 52:7. What Paul was arguing for was the necessity for the truth to be proclaimed before saving faith can come to the lost. Paul claims that this occurs through the preacher who is sent out by God. As Paul makes his case, the necessity of preaching the truth is exalted through his words.

Romans 10:17

***Romans 10:17:** So faith {comes} from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ (NASB).*

Part of the task of the church is evangelism. Evangelism is not to be carried out with tricky schemes or plans. It is to be carried out in a straight forward manner through the Word of God. The point is that if people are to come to faith in Jesus Christ, they must hear the Word of God. The Word must be preached within and without the walls of the local assembly.

1 Corinthians 1:18

1 Corinthians 1:18: For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (NASB).

Paul speaks about the preaching of the cross. According to Paul, it is merely foolishness to those who are perishing, but unto those who are being saved (the saved) – it is the power of God. The power of God refers to both the power to save and the power to sanctify. Preaching is connected with the message of the cross. To Paul, no other preaching existed. If it was anything other than preaching Jesus as the Christ – it was not true preaching. Therefore, that message was what the early church was centered upon – and the preaching of that message was central to the worship practices of the early church.

1 Corinthians 1:21

1 Corinthians 1:21: For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not {come to} know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe (NASB).

Paul addresses the believers in Corinth regarding the subject of man's wisdom. Paul explains that the message preached (Jesus Christ) is foolishness to the world. The point here is not centered upon the act of preaching as much as it is the content of the message preached. However, the point should be made – the content of the message must be preached. Without the preaching of the message of foolishness – nobody would be saved! The message must be preached and Paul himself was committed to doing that wherever God sent him.

1 Timothy 4:13

1 Timothy 4:13: Until I come, give attention to the {public} reading {of Scripture,} to exhortation and teaching. (NASB).

“The exposition of the Word involved three elements: presentation of the Word (it was read), explanation of the Word (making it clear and giving its meaning), and exhortation

based on the Word.”³ Therefore, the point is clear – preaching is to be done for the purpose of spiritual growth – until Christ returns.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

2 Timothy 3:16-17: All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work (NASB).

As Paul addressed the young preacher Timothy, he instructed him regarding the holy Scriptures. In this text, Paul speaks of teaching the Scriptures. As the early church was centered around the teaching of the Apostles’ doctrine, it was important for Timothy to understand how to effectively minister in a city like Ephesus. Paul insisted that the teaching of the Scriptures would be profitable for exposing sin, correcting sin, and training the people to live in righteousness. According to Paul, when this is done – the Christian will be able to grow and will be equipped for the Christian life. Therefore, preaching the Scriptures is essential for Christian maturity.

2 Timothy 4:1-2

2 Timothy 4:1-2: I solemnly charge {you} in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season {and} out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction (NASB).

Paul builds upon what he had just spoken to Timothy in the previous section of his letter to Timothy. After speaking about the profitability of the Scriptures, he then turns and commands (with forceful urgency) Timothy to preach the Word of God. The word translated *preach* in this text is the Greek word κήρυξον. It is the aorist active imperative of κηρύσσω meaning to herald the truth! It would become easy for Timothy to sway in the pressures of Ephesus, but Paul was making it clear – he had no option to sway – for he was to preach the Word of God.

³ Bryan Chapell. *Christ-Centered Preaching – Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 86-87.

Concluding Remarks

It seems evident from the biblical evidence that the New Testament was centered around the teaching and preaching of Scripture. Preaching was central as the early church was established by Christ Himself, and it remained central as sinful problems such as false teaching started to arise. As we read about the Apostle Paul, we see that the Word of God being preached was central to evangelism (the task of the church). As we read the Apostle's words to Timothy, we see that the preaching of the Word is central and essential to the spiritual growth of the church. Therefore, all biblical evidence points to the centrality of preaching as a mark and function of the church of Jesus Christ.

Office Evidence

The evidence contained in the offices of the church point to the centrality of preaching within the church. The church only has two offices according to Scripture. These two offices are elders and deacons. The term "elder" is understood to be synonymous with the term pastor and overseer. Therefore, the implications and responsibilities of the elder point toward the centrality of preaching.

According to the New Testament, several responsibilities fall upon the shoulders of the elders. The responsibilities include preaching, teaching, overseeing, and watching for the souls of the flock of God (*1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 13:17; 1 Peter 5:2*). In all situations, the elder is to carry out these responsibilities through the ministry of the Word. Therefore, it is important to note that the preaching of the Word is the elder's call and responsibility to God for His church.

Elder's Responsibility For Preaching

1 Timothy 3:2: An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach (NASB),

In 1 Timothy 3, the qualifications for the pastor (overseer) is revealed. This list includes the ability to teach the people. John MacArthur says, “The God-ordained means to save, sanctify, and strengthen His church is preaching.”⁴ Preaching is the way that God expects the Word to be delivered to His church. Paul instructed Timothy to “*preach* the Word (2 Tim. 4).” As the overseer of the church is called to the office, God gives Him the ability to teach the Word of God. Therefore, as the elder is called to the role and given the ability, it indicates that preaching the Word is central to the church.

2 Timothy 4:2: *preach the word; be ready in season {and} out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction (NASB).*

Paul, under holy inspiration, penned the words to Timothy saying, “*Preach* the Word.” Preaching involves the delivery of the Word to the church. Preaching is more specific than merely talking in a public manner before the congregation. Preaching involves the heralding of the truth – more specifically – the Word. “Sermons should have real teaching in them, and their doctrine should be solid, substantial, and abundant.”⁵ Therefore, the office of elder includes the high responsibility to deliver the faithful Word of God to the people of God.

Elder’s Responsibility For Oversight

1 Peter 5:2: *shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to {the will of} God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness (NASB);*

God calls the elders to shepherd and oversee the flock of God. “An elder must be able to teach and defend the faith.”⁶ The term “oversight” is the Greek word, ἐπισκοποῦντες which comes from the root ἐπισκοπέω meaning “to give careful consideration to something, with the implication of guarding against.” God calls the elders to oversee the flock in a manner that properly manages the people and oversees the flock against heresy (*Titus 1:9*). “To be able to

⁴ John MacArthur, *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), 250.

⁵ C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students: First Series* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 72.

⁶ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*. (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1995), 79.

protect his flock from the ‘savage wolves’ (Acts 20:29) who seek to destroy it, a pastor must be able ‘to refute those who contradict.’ False teachers have plagued the church from its inception, and will continue to do so. They are a deadly peril against which a pastor must constantly be on guard.”⁷ “The New Testament requires that a pastor elder ‘[hold] fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching’ (Titus 1:9a). This means that an elder must firmly adhere to orthodox, historic, biblical teaching.”⁸ There is no better way to protect the flock of God other than faithful preaching of God’s Word.

Historical Evidence

Along with large amount of biblical evidence and evidence surrounding the office of the elder, a large amount of evidence supporting the centrality of preaching is also contained in the history of the church. From the book of Acts until our present day, a long line of preachers who have faithfully preached the Word leap off of the pages of history. It is their practices, ambitions, goals, and service that demonstrate the centrality of preaching within the church of Jesus Christ.

From the close of the New Testament until Origen, very little exists in form of written preaching and sermons. The preserved writings often deal with persecution and problems that were plaguing the early Christians. Toward the middle part of the 2nd century, due largely to the amount of Gnostic doctrines, Christians were forced to write on the totality of Christian doctrine. Out of this period, Irenaeus, Clement, Tertullian, and Origen penned much about the Christian faith in form of written literature and sermon.

From Origen through history to Augustine, from Augustine to Luther, from Luther to Calvin, from Calvin to Bunyan, and from Bunyan to our present pulpit, we see sparks of preachers who continue to proclaim the Word of God. While we may not agree with all of their

⁷ John MacArthur, *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), 251.

⁸ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*. (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1995), 79.

actions, theology, and methodologies, we must agree on the centrality of preaching as a means of feeding the flock of God. During this long line of preachers and preaching many peaks and valleys existed. Periods of war and peace, persecution and favor, preservation and perversion, and periods of faithful preaching and allegory. Although the church has experienced many different periods of trial throughout history, the church has been preserved by God. Likewise, the church has remained centered around the preaching of God's Word. D. Martin Lloyd Jones said, "I now want to go a step further and to suggest that this evidence from the New Testament itself, supported and exemplified by the history of the Church, leads us to the conclusion that the ultimate justification for asserting the primacy of preaching is theological. In other words I argue that the whole message of the Bible asserts this and drives us to this conclusion. What do I mean by that? Essentially I mean that the moment you consider man's real need, and also the nature of salvation announced and proclaimed in the Scriptures, you are driven to the conclusion that the primary task of the Church is to preach and proclaim this, to show man's real need, and to show the only remedy, the only cure for it."⁹

Pre-Reformation Era

The era prior to the Reformation was filled with all manner of perversion in worship. This perversion caused problems in the area of preaching and thereby – it perverted the ordinances. Like D. Martin Lloyd Jones said, "the primacy of preaching is theological."¹⁰ As the papacy had experienced trial and problem through internal conflicts, under the reign of Innocent III in the year of 1215, the practice of transubstantiation was instituted.¹¹ This time period produced weak preaching and perverted practices such as transubstantiation.

Not long after the initiation of transubstantiation took place, the Catholic Catechism of

⁹ D.Martin Lloyd Jones, *Preaching & Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹¹ See Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), 310.

1257 claimed that baptism was necessary for salvation. Therefore, it can be assumed that as preaching the Word decreased over the years from the early church, it led to the perversion of the ordinances of the Lord's Supper and Baptism.

Reformation Era

The Reformation preaching sought to bring back faithful Bible exposition. John Broadus comments, "Instead of long and often fabulous stories about saints and martyrs, and accounts of miracles, instead of passages from Aristotle and Seneca, and fine-spun subtleties of the Schoolmen, these men preached the Bible. The question was not what the Pope said; and even the Fathers, however highly esteemed, were not decisive authority-it was the Bible. The preacher's one great task was to set forth the doctrinal and moral teachings of the Word of God."¹² It was during this time that the great Reformers were taking a stand against the Catholic Church through the preaching and printing of God's Word. Some lost their lives as a result, but in the end, preaching prevailed by the grace of God. "In giving a response to this Roman Catholic teaching, we should remember that the Reformation centered upon this issue. Martin Luther's great concern was to teach that salvation depends on faith alone, not on faith plus works."¹³ Walt Kaiser explains the thoughts of Luther against the perversion of the text. "Origen's allegories are not worth so much dirt, for allegories are empty speculations...the scum of Holy Scripture. Allegories are awkward, absurd, invented, obsolete, loose rags."¹⁴

¹² John Broadus, *Lectures on the History of Preaching* (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2004), 114.

¹³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 973.

¹⁴ Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology – Biblical Exegesis for Preaching & Teaching*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 60-61.

Puritan Era

Often called the more radical reformers, the Puritans fought against the evils of the Church of England. Much like the Reformers, the Puritans sought to preserve the Word of God and to take it to the common person. The Puritans were radical in their stance, but they still loved the Church of England and wanted to see it reformed. Although they wanted to see reform, they were not willing to sit back and watch preaching and the church decline. Therefore, with boldness they sought to bring back the people to solid biblical preaching and teaching.

The Puritans had witnessed much perversion of the Scriptures through history. They understood what the Reformers faced in relation to Mediaeval perversions and Catholic dogma. Therefore, as they preached, they sought to uphold the historical grammatical aspect of the text. “The Reformers had insisted, against the Mediaeval depreciation of the ‘literal’ sense of Scripture in favor of the various ‘spiritual’ (allegorical) senses, that the literal-i.e., the grammatical, natural, intended-sense was the only sense that Scripture, and that it was this sense that must be sought in exposition through careful attention to the context and grammar of each statement. The Puritans fully agreed.”¹⁵

Modern Era

History has a way of repeating itself. Currently in our present era, preaching remains central to the church, but it lacks in many areas. It seems to be weakened by a lack of true theology and harmful methodologies. “Baptists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries generally agreed (that Christ established the laws of the church government). Church polity, they conceded, was not the most essential area of doctrine. But just because it was not central to salvation did not mean that it was not important. The doctrine of the church was as much revealed truth as the doctrines of the incarnation, the atonement, and justification. It was an element of orthodox belief. For this reason Baptists sometimes disfellowshipped one another over

¹⁵ J.I. Packer, “The Puritans as Interpreters of Scripture” In *Puritan Papers* (2000): 195.

disagreements in polity.”¹⁶ Therefore, it is evident that many conflicts over issues such as church government have caused problems in our present day. Like previous history, the church has remained centered on the preaching of God’s Word. Differing groups may disagree on the number of pastors for each church, but the essential function of preaching continues to be carried out in the church.

Conclusion

The most important part of the church’s functionality today centers upon the preaching of God’s Word. “The Word of God must be central to our lives as individuals and as a church because God’s Spirit uses the Word to create faith in us ... and because He also uses the Word to make us grow.”¹⁷ Without preaching, souls would be lost, the church would degrade, and theology would fall into the waters of liberalism and human reasoning. The church’s source of nutrients is found in the preaching of God’s Word. “The purpose is simple and specific. We are called to preach Christ.”¹⁸ It is evident from the New Testament that the elders are called to preach Christ and Him crucified. God has inspired His Word, revealed His Word, and preserved His Word over time for His people. We must (as His church) remain people of the Book! All evidence in this study points to the centrality of preaching as a mark and function of the church of Jesus Christ. Therefore, based upon clear biblical and historical evidence, it is my position that preaching is central to the church of Jesus Christ as a mark and function.

Through history as people persecuted or perverted preaching – great suffering came to the church. Today, some problems still exist. “Admittedly, expository preaching has suffered

¹⁶ Greg Wills, “The Church: Baptists and Their Churches in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries” In *Polity* (2001): 19.

¹⁷ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 50.

¹⁸ Stephen Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 14.

severely in the pulpits of those claiming to be its friends.”¹⁹ Therefore, we must guard ourselves against the times and pressures of our times. It is through preaching that the truth will be spoken and obeyed. As the Psalmist wrote so eloquently in Psalm 119:105, “*Thy word [is] a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path (KJV).*” May we continue to exalt the preaching and teaching of the Word of God! If the church is going to bring glory to God, it must be done through faithful preaching. Faithful preaching involves a commitment to preserving the authorial intent. It was Origen and others through history that were swallowed by allegory. “This commitment means that we are never welcome to preach a message from a text other than the one the author had or that was shown elsewhere in Scripture that referred to that text. We limit ourselves to authorial intent because we believe the words have real meaning.”²⁰ Therefore, may we always remember the words from Paul to his young protégé Timothy – *Preach the Word!*

¹⁹ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching – The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 21.

²⁰ Hershael W. York *Preaching with Bold Assurance* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 28.

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